

Chapter 472

Contribution

Late into the night, the space outside of the Adventure Society's central admin complex was still crowded with people. To Jason's delight, some enterprising local vendors had wheeled carts into the Adventure Society campus that magically expanded into food stalls, creating an impromptu food market. Since he and Rufus were still waiting for Farrah to emerge, they roamed around, sampling local delicacies.

The streets were lit up not just with plain street lights but different coloured glow stones that painted the primarily white stone buildings and tropical plants. The Adventure Society campus had plenty of wide boulevards and open spaces, which the people and the vendors gave a festival atmosphere.

"It's good that people are enjoying themselves," Rufus said. "If Dawn's warnings hold true, there are dark days for all of us ahead."

"Nope," Jason said. "I've had quite enough of dark days, thank you very much. If the Builder and his creepy steampunk cyborgs want to make things crappy for people, they need to go through me. I'm appointing myself the defender of cheerfulness, friendly barbecues and nice afternoon naps. You have to help, by the way."

"I'll do my best," Rufus said with a chuckle.

"They said Farrah should be out within an hour or two," Jason said. "They're waiting on more information from the Magic Society, though, and I have to imagine that delays are more likely than not with all these people swamping the admin staff."

"I fear you're right," Rufus said.

"Why is it so crowded?" Jason asked. "The monster surge announcement is only hours old. Do even the locals get only a day to sign up?"

"No, they get more leeway," Rufus said. "They still want to get registered as quickly as possible, though."

"They want first pick of contracts while everyone else is still signing up?"

"That's part of it," Rufus said. "The real prize is the contributions leaderboard. Did they explain that to you?"

"Is that like action quotas?" Jason asked. "They explained those."

"Action quotas are the minimum requirements every adventurer has to fulfil during the monster surge," Rufus said. "The contribution board is an incentive system to keep us going beyond our quotas. All the contracts you take over and above your quota are assigned a contribution point value. Contribution points are tallied on weekly and overall

leaderboards, with rewards given out at the end of each week and then major rewards at the end. And those rewards are worth going for.”

“So, it’s not all about duty, then.”

“It would be nice if every adventurer did their part because that’s what being an adventurer is. Not everyone is your friend, Humphrey, though. A little incentive goes a long way, and the incentives on offer aren’t that little. All the major societies, associations and governments give out hefty rewards during a monster surge. Of course, they get benefits as well. They all have interests that need protection and in return for their generosity, the Adventure Society assigns high contribution point values to the contracts that provide that protection.”

“Don’t the big guilds monopolise the top of these leaderboards?”

“They do,” Rufus said, “but that’s okay. Guilds are looking for more esoteric rewards than cash or magic items. They want access to civic services. Organisational benefits from the Adventure Society, Magic Society, Alchemy Association and the like. Material rewards don’t mean much to the top guilds because they’re already able to get their hands on anything money can buy.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “All the material rewards are lower-rung prizes.”

“Exactly,” Rufus said. “They land right where the small-time guilds and independent adventurers can get their hands on them. Plus, the guilds earn their rewards. Not only do they need to reach the highest points on the contributions but they have the highest quotas to beat before they even get on those boards.”

Jason and Rufus were eating deep-fried sausages on sticks.

“In a city like this,” Rufus continued, gesticulating with his food, “about three in ten adventurers are in a guild. One in ten is in what’s considered a high-end guild. And that’s not even counting all the outside adventurers coming in that make their numbers an even smaller slice of the adventurer pie. Yet guilds are given sixty percent of the quotas to fill. Guild adventurers enjoy more privileges than their independent counterparts but the monster surge is when every adventurer pays back. No exceptions. The guilds will be wringing themselves dry over the coming weeks.”

Jason was peering at his half-eaten deep-fried sausage on a stick.

“This meat is pretty great,” he said. “It’s like a saveloy except it doesn’t taste like the animal died in vain.”

“This isn’t meat,” Rufus said. “It’s made of vegetables.”

“This is made of vegetables?” Jason asked, pointing at his food. “This thing here.”

“Yes,” Rufus confirmed. “It’s a mash sausage.”

“There are vegetables here that taste like this?” Jason asked, shaking his head. “I like ratatouille as much as the next guy but my world got ripped off. Vegans would love it here.”

“What’s a vegan?”

“They need to let Farrah out,” Rufus said, sounding bloated. “At this point, I’m fairly certain I’ve eaten my body weight in food.”

“Let’s hear it for converting organic material into autonomically mutable biomass,” Jason said. “Were those dumplings sweet or savoury?”

“Both,” Rufus said.

“As in, they have both sweet and savoury dumplings, or each dumpling is somehow both sweet and savoury? Actually, don’t spoil the surprise.”

Even in the small hours of the morning, the area around the main administration was still full of people. While Jason was waiting in line for dumplings, Farrah was released from the sealed underground complex of the Builder response team and contacted them via voice chat. She, like Jason, had been stuck eating spirit coins for most of the last two years and took to the food stalls with the same enthusiasm he had.

“You never used to mind living on spirit coins,” Rufus said.

“You never used to wax your head,” Farrah shot back before happily biting into a grilled sandwich.

“I don’t wax my…”

Rufus shook his head in resignation.

“What are we doing now?” he said, firmly changing the topic. “This city might be lively at all hours but that doesn’t make this a great time to go hunting for a place to stay.”

“We’ll hit the water,” Jason said. “We can stay in the boat overnight while we travel to Arnote and find a place in the morning. Then we can just portal back to Livaros to take contracts.”

“Or shop,” Farrah said. “I’m surprised you haven’t run off to grab some crystal wash, Jason.”

“I do have some self-control, you know.”

Rufus and Farrah shared a look.

“What?” Jason asked them.

“Jason,” Rufus said. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

They both gave Jason a flat look.

“I didn't do anything,” he said again. “I'm just glad people are so open to magic in this city.”

“What does that mean?” Farrah asked.

After Shade turned into a shadow boat that carried them out onto the sea, Jason had used the cloud flask to create a yacht. Shade took the helm was steering them towards the island of Arnote. Jason and Farrah were enjoying the luxuries of the cloud vessel, many of which were unusual to Rufus.

“I'm not sure I understand this music,” Rufus said. “Why are people shouting at this pale boy to play music?”

“To change rock 'n' rolling minds,” Farrah explained. “It's a self-explanatory song.”

“Exactly how thorough was the Adventure Society's identity check?” Rufus asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

While Rufus was familiar with the many amenities of Emir's cloud flask constructs, and while Jason's lacked many of the same, it did boast some that Emir's did not. This was a result of feeding the cloud flask elements only available in Jason's world, including quite a lot of technology quintessence.

The result of this was a variety of effects that could be replicated with magic but were made more convenient with a technological aspect. For example, the extensive media collection in Jason and Farrah's recording crystals could be accessed via menu screens. As Farrah and Rufus were catching up while Farrah shared her new musical tastes, Jason was on the upper deck, laying out a magical diagram.

One of Jason's happy discoveries in his short time on Livaros was that such a cosmopolitan magical city was open to all manner of unusual situations. This included shadowy familiars being seen as perfectly acceptable customers, so long as they had the power to communicate and sufficient coin. In the time Jason had been dealing with the Adventure Society, Shade had been roaming the city's night markets. Along with other critical supplies, he had been purchasing the required materials to resummon Jason's familiar, Gordon.

In Rimaros, finding the materials to summon any silver-rank familiar was a question of money, rather than time. Jason had looted his way through proto-astral spaces, monster surges and transformation zones, the more numerous and high-rank of which came after he stopped supplying the Network with funds. As a result, Jason's coffers were, relative to a silver-ranker, at Scrooge McDuck levels of overflowing.

Monster surges represented a specific economic cycle. While the surges were costly to communities, the rebuilding afterwards was always a stimulus. Governments funded the rebuilding, the money largely sourced from special services offered to adventurers and the Adventure Society. With the increased looting opportunities that surges brought, there was not shortage of demand for such services.

Jason had been going through what amounted to concentrated private monster surges for years. Outside of family wealth, only a gold-ranker who had been operating for a decade could compete with Jason's current prosperity.

Colin, in the form of a Jason look-alike blood clone, was standing next to one of Shade's bodies as they watched Jason prepare to reunite their little family. Jason carefully completed the ritual circle and chanted out the incantation.

"When worlds end, you are the arbiter. When gods fall, you are the instrument. Herald of annihilation, come forth and be my harbinger. I have doom to bring."

Under the night sky on open water, the stars were bright. The city island of Livaros was beautiful at night with its cornucopia of lights, but without the light pollution, the sky was a sea of twinkling lights, ruled by the twin moons.

As Jason completed his ritual, the light of the moon and stars dimmed as darkness shrouded the boat. Eventually, the light was fully expunged, only Jason's power to see through darkness allowing him to see. Two motes of light appeared over the ritual circle, one orange and one blue. More lights appeared, slowly at first but accelerating until the individual motes became a cascade of blue and orange radiance. It swirled together to take the form of an eye-like nebula that was a match for the ones in Jason's eyes. Finally, the light coalesced into Jason's last familiar, a dark cloak draped over the nebula and orbited by smaller nebula eyes. Jason broke into a huge grin.

"Welcome home, mate."

In the early light of morning, the cloud yacht was approaching the island of Arnote. Jason was on the deck cooking breakfast with ingredients that Shade had picked up in the night markets of Livaros.

"Fair warning," he told the lounging Rufus and Farrah, "I don't know what most of this stuff is, so it's going to be trial and error for a while."

The Sea of Storms was calm, as was normal in any part of it not being subjected to the magical weather for which it was named. After breakfast, as the cloud yacht pulled into a small port, Jason stretched his arms out lazily, finally feeling like himself again. Eating

actual food, fresh from a crystal wash shower and with trusted companions by his side, he felt at home on this unfamiliar sea in a way he never had on Earth.

Miles Cotezee looked up as Humphrey and his team, plus hangers-on in Gary and Jory filled up his office.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve asked me to do for you?” he said without preamble. “How busy I am right now?”

They had returned to Vitesse aboard a Builder airship they casually picked up along the way, which the Magic Society had been very happy to take off their hands. They had immediately started scooping up contracts that others had passed over for being a pain, portalling around to clear a half dozen of them in two days.

Their behaviour made it obvious that they had wanted something from the outset, with Miles the one they sought to get it through. Travel dispensation to an as-yet-undisclosed location during a monster surge was no small request.

“Asking for a status update on a dead team member is weird,” Miles said without preamble. “And another from your team, Mr Xandier, which involved some administrative hoops, given your inactive status with the Adventure Society. Fortunately, your prompt registration for the monster surge brought you some goodwill in the eyes of the society.”

“You have news?” Humphrey asked.

“You know, Humphrey, I thought you took after your father, seeming like such a sensible young man. It turns out that you’re your mother’s son after all.”

“He asked if you have news,” Sophie said, placing both hands on the desk sitting between them.

“Calm down, Sophie,” Miles told her. “It does seem that you are right. Your dead team members have arisen from the grave and are alive and well in Rimaros, in the Sea of Storms.”

The group shared looks of relief and joy.

“I made another discovery along with information, though. Your other team member, Mr Xandier, has registered his participation in the monster surge in Rimaros, alongside the other two.”

“Rufus is there already?” Gary said. “How?”

“You now know as much as I do,” Miles said.

“Rimaros is the other side of the planet,” Clive said.

“Yes,” Miles said. “Which makes obtaining a travel dispensation quite the task.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Humphrey asked.

“Of course there is,” Miles said. “It’s me. Clive, the operation that was delayed when you were sent away is not only back on but has been given priority. You pull this off with the kind of success you outlined in your initial proposal and I can get you your dispensation. You’ll have to travel by airship, though. I can’t shake loose a gold-rank portal user for this. Not even your mother, Humphrey.”

Humphrey nodded.

“I haven’t even seen her since we got back,” he said. “They’re keeping her busy.”

“So we just have to do whatever Clive was up to before we all met up?” Neil asked.

“Yes,” Miles said. “The remnants of the church of Purity have been quiet for years but we’re anticipating a big move from them during the monster surge. The society is looking for ways to hit them before they hit us and your plan, Clive, is one of many proposals being put into action. The new priority comes with a new caveat, however.”

“Meaning?” Clive asked.

“The society wants a three-star silver in charge of it and none of you are higher than two. Someone else will be in charge of your team for the course of the operation.”